

# A CENSUS OF NESTS IN A PRIVATE 'BIRD-SANCTUARY'

BY

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(With a text figure).

A compound of about forty acres, in which over six hundred people, mostly boys and girls, live all the year round, may not seem very ideal for a bird sanctuary. But the grounds are well planted with trees, and many nesting-boxes invite those species of birds that like holes in which to nest. The children are brought up to observe and protect all wild-life; so it is not surprising that one hundred and thirty-one nests belonging to twenty-nine species were found, mostly in the months of March, April and May 1947. This represents more than this number of nesting pairs of birds, because each colony of Blue Rock-Pigeons is only counted as one, for it was impossible to find out how many pairs were actually nesting. Although many birds built second nests and laid second clutches of eggs, as far as is known, these are not included in the account given below. Many in the family of six hundred contributed to the notes from which this account is compiled, and without their observations and reports I could not have made this survey as complete as it is.

I shall take the species one by one in the order in which they are found in Baker and Inglis's *Birds of Southern India*.

The compound in which this study was made is surrounded by comparatively barren palmyra-land on three sides, with a stretch of paddy land very near to the north. Three small villages adjoin three corners of the land.

## 1. *Corvus macrorhynchos*. Jungle Crow. *Two nests.*

(1) Neem tree (*Azadirachta Indica*). About 25 feet above the ground.

It was interesting to watch the parent bird which had been out foraging. As it came near the nest it cawed loudly and made its wings vibrate in a peculiar way as it volplaned down to the nest.

(2) *Albizzia Lebbek*. At least 40 feet.

## 2. *Corvus splendens*. Common Indian House Crow. *Four nests.*

(1) *Ceiba pentandra*; near the extremity of the branch—25 feet.

(2) About 15 feet up in a Nqem tree.

(3) Palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*), 80 feet up.

(4) Palmyra palm, 25 feet.

We do not encourage either of these two kinds of crow for they do a good deal of damage to other birds' eggs and young. There is not even honour among these thieves, for one day we watched a Jungle Crow fly to a Common Crow's nest and crack and drink the eggs in spite of much opposition from the owner and its companions. The Jungle Crow finally flew off with the last egg in its beak to enjoy it elsewhere in quiet.

## 3. *Turdoides griseus*. White-headed Babbler. *One nest.*

Cork tree (*Millingtonia hortensis*) 6 or 7 feet only from the ground in a thick group of suckers which had grown up from the roots of a large tree. This nest was not discovered for a long time although many boys passed close to it daily.

4. *Ægithina tiphia*. Common Iora. *Eight nests.*

(1) Portia tree (*Thespesia populnea*), 6 feet, close to a road much frequented by cattle, and bullock bandies. But it was cleverly hidden by the large leaves of the tree.

(2) *Cassia fistula*, 10 feet, beside a house in which many boys live. This was only discovered after one of the young birds in learning to fly had fallen to the ground. It was kept in a cage for a day or so where its parents trustingly came to feed it, and finally flew away safely.

(3) *Bassia longifolia*, 10 feet, in the centre of a courtyard, often full of boys and noise. This was also pretty well camouflaged by the leaves of the tree.

(4) *Delonix regia*, 15 feet, in the fork of a horizontal branch beside a road. This may possibly have been built by the same pair of birds as No. 3.

(5) *Casuarina equisetifolia*, fairly high up in a very tall tree in a courtyard surrounded by buildings.

(6) *Tabebuia rosea*, 3½ feet, and 10 feet from a house beside a main path.

(7) *Delonix regia*, 15 feet, similar position to No. 4, but in another part of the compound.

(8) *Hibiscus* sp., 4 feet, and only 7 feet from a house in which some children live.

The position of these nests suggests that this species may have a defined territory, but this needs more study. The nests are so beautifully built and so easily escape detection that there may be more than we found within the area.

5. *Molpastes cafer*. Ceylon Red-vented Bulbul. *Three nests.*

(1) Hibiscus, about 6 feet, in a bush growing beside a house.

(2) Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), in an open space in which many trees are growing.

(3) Plantain tree (*Musa paradisiaca*), 6 feet, in the hanging bunch of unripe fruit, in one of our market gardens adjoining the residential area. This is a very popular place for this bird to nest. It is surprising that only three nests of this species were found, but it is possible that it prefers plantain groves and such more secluded places, of which there are many not too far away.

6. *Saxicoloides fulicata*. Black-backed Indian Robin. *One nest.*

A hole in a wall about 6 feet high on the outer fringe of the inhabited area. This same pair built again later at the top of a verandah pillar a hundred yards away in the last house in our compound. Though these birds do not shun human beings they never build their nests within a built up area but are often found on the edge of a compound. When the bungalow I occupy was first built it was the furthest out-building near the then limit of our compound; and a pair of these birds reared three broods in succession in one year in the same nest built on the wall-plate that lies along the top of the verandah pillars.

7. *Copsychus saularis*. Indian Magpie Robin. *Eleven nests.*

(1) *Albizia lebbek*, a natural hole, 15 feet. This tree has many holes in which Rose-ringed Paroquet, Brahminy Myna, and Yellow-throated Sparrow also have nested within recent years.

(2) *Caryota urens*, in the hollow where the leaf-sheath clasps the trunk, 10 feet, beside my house. This palm was planted many years ago and has to be watered as it does not usually grow on the plains. This pair had a second brood in an old hollow log, twenty-five yards away, which we had tied up on a tree as a nesting-box. This log has an interesting history. Many years ago it came as a piece of firewood from the foothills. One of our men heard a peculiar noise coming from the pile of firewood, and, after investigation, found a nearly-fledged Ceylon Green Barbet, still alive after the tree had been cut down and cut up and carted to our compound. It was reared and tamed and lived with us for many months. This log has formed a nesting place for several generations of Magpie-Robins.

(3) Custard-Apple tree (*Annona squamosa*), 10 feet, in an old earthenware pot tied up to attract bees, beside a house.

(4) Roof of a house, where the main roof overhangs and joins a lean-to, 7 feet, at the end of a school building where boys come and go all day.

(5) In a 'rose' watering-can which was hanging in a bush, beside a well.

(6) Verandah roof of a bungalow at the corner where the cross beams and roof timbers form an enclosed hollow. This site has been used for several years, 7 feet.

(7) *Thevetia neriifolia*, 4 feet. The tree is beside a much-frequented path on one side, and about 5 feet from the verandah of a house on the other side. This is the second year this hole has been used. It is more a hollow than a proper hole, and the eggs can easily be seen.

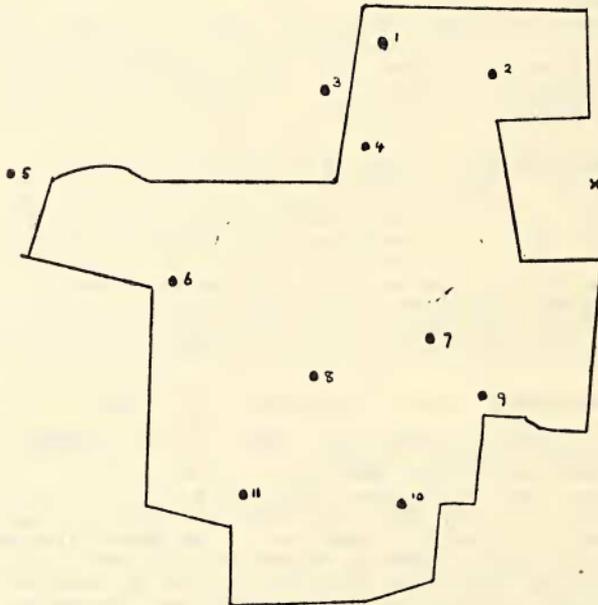
(8) Bamboo-section nesting-box, 7 feet, in *Lawsonia inermis*, behind and close to a bungalow. This was used for two broods this year.

(9) Rain-tree (*Samanea saman*), a natural hole, 10 feet. In another hole in the same tree a Coppersmith was building.

(10) Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), a natural hole, 12 feet. This is apparently looked upon as a very desirable building-site, for during past years it has been the scene of fierce and prolonged fights between Yellow-throated Sparrow and Common Myna, Magpie-Robin and Golden-backed Woodpecker. The two latter have several times nested there to my knowledge, and at least twice a swarm of bees (*Apis indica*) has occupied it in the off-season.

(11) Verandah roof of a bungalow in exactly similar position to No. 6, about three hundred yards away from it. Magpie Robins have increased

#### MAGPIE-ROBIN TERRITORIES.



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greatly in numbers during the twenty years I have been here. From one or two pairs they now number at least fifteen pairs, for I knew of other nests this year just outside the area under consideration. The interesting thing is that when I go for 'bird-walks' in the surrounding countryside, more often than not we never see a single Magpie-Robin. It seems as if they

definitely look upon our compound as a protected area. But they have very clear ideas concerning territory. About sixty yards is the nearest any two nests were found; and within their kingdom each male bird has one or two high points, usually the topmost branch of a tree, from which he sings, especially in the morning (often beginning before dawn), and in the evening, during the nesting period. We have several times seen trespassers being punished.

The two crosses in the diagram indicate two other pairs of birds whose range was in each case a vegetable and fruit garden, but their nests were not found. In view of Mr. Kingdon Ward's letter on page 549 of Volume 46, No. 3 of the *Journal*, I should like to draw attention to Nos. 4, 6 and 11 above, which show that it is not at all uncommon with us for Magpie-Robins to build their nests in occupied human dwellings. Our birds are very tame and quite unafraid of us.

8. *Dicurus macrocerus*. King-Crow. *One nest.*

*Albizzia lebbek*, 25 feet, cleverly built in a bunch of leaves growing where the tree had been pollarded. This bird does not suffer marauders gladly, and it will attack any kites or crows however innocent they may appear if they fly at all near the nesting-tree. I have known smaller birds nest in the same tree. Is it because of the safety this affords to them?

9. *Orthotomus sutorius*. Indian Tailor-bird. *Nine nests.*

(1) Guava (*Psidium guajava*), under 6 feet, close to a house. Nearly all the nests are very close to inhabited buildings.

(2) *Hibiscus* sp., 5 feet, under the eaves of a bathroom so that no amount of heavy rain touched it.

(3) Indian Almond (*Terminalia catappa*), 7 feet up.

(4) *Bougainvillea* sp., 3 feet, beside the porch of a house.

(5) *Porana volubilis*, 6 feet.

(6) *Butea frondosa*, 6 feet. This was built by a foolish pair, for when the wind blew the nest tilted up so that the young fell out.

(7) *Citrus* sp.

(8) Indian Almond.

(9) *Bignonia magnifica* near to a verandah.

One of these pairs for its second attempt built three nests, one about 8 feet high in a Cannon-ball tree, one only 2 feet from the ground in the leaves of a yam, and the third less than 2 feet off the ground in a *Bryophyllum pinnatum* plant. The last was not completed and I think the first was finally used. I often saw it trying to separate threads from some rough string used to tie up a creeper. It would take hold of a loose end and try to fly away, but usually the string was too strong and it failed.

10. *Temenuchus pagodarum*. Brahminy Myna. *One nest.*

A nesting-box of the ordinary square box-like type 15 feet up in a Tamarind tree (*Tamarindus indica*). Two broods were hatched out successively in this box.

11. *Acridotheres tristis*. Common Myna. *Three nests.*

(1) Palmyra palm, 30 feet, two trees were growing close together, and two leaves, one from each tree, supported each other. In the hollow of one opened leaf this nest was visible through the leaf to any one standing below.

(2) Palmyra palm, 40 feet, in the crown. This has been used as a nesting-site for many years.

(3) Coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) about 25 feet, in a garden on the edge of the compound.

These mynas are bullies. I have seen them sitting and shouting beside a Yellow-throated Sparrow's nesting hole which was far too small for them to use. The sparrow was frantically flying round, but they stayed for a long time, sometimes looking in, sometimes just sitting beside it. They have nested in natural holes in neem and palmyra trees, and also in our square nesting-boxes in other years.

12. *Gymnohris xanthocliis*. Yellow-throated Sparrow. *Twenty-four nests*.

- (1) Bamboo nesting-box in tamarind tree, 20 feet.
- (2) Square nesting-box in tamarind tree, 20 feet.
- (3) *Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole, 15 feet.
- (4) Hole in a wall, 8 feet, previously used by a hoopoe. As soon as the hoopoe's young were fledged a pair of sparrows moved in.
- (5) *Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole where a branch had died and rot set in, 20 feet.
- (6) Bamboo nesting-box, in neem tree, 20 feet, occupied as soon as put up.
- (7) Log nesting box in neem tree, 20 feet.
- (8) Bamboo pole stored in the roof of a carpentry-shed, about 8 feet high.
- (9) Neem tree, natural hole, 10 feet. As this tree is beside one of our tame pigeon-cotes it has a plentiful supply of feathers for lining the nest.
- (10) Bamboo nesting-box in neem tree, 15 feet.
- (11) Bamboo nesting-box in tamarind tree, 15 feet.
- (12) *Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole, 15 feet.
- (13) Bamboo nesting-box in neem tree, 10 feet.
- (14) *Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole, 30 feet.
- (15) Bamboo roof pole in a garden lean-to, 8 feet.
- (16) One of a pile of stored bamboos, 3 feet.
- (17) *Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole, 25 feet.
- (18) Hole in corner of roof of church tower, about 50 feet high. This was used in previous years by a pair of hoopoes.
- (19) Hole in corner of main roof of church, 15 feet.
- (20) Rain-tree (*Samanea saman*), natural hole, 15 feet.
- (21) Square nesting-box in a tamarind tree, 15 feet.
- (22) Hole made by a misplaced tile in bungalow verandah roof, 7 feet. When the young were being taught to fly, one fell to the ground among some plants at the edge of a path. A pariah dog passed by, and the mother, constantly calling, flew low over its back to distract it. Fortunately the young bird remained quiet. We later retrieved it and put it back into the nest.
- (23) Bamboo nesting-box in neem tree, 20 feet.
- (24) Neem tree, natural hole, 15 feet.

These birds are exceedingly common. They seem to have no territorial jealousies, for some of the nests were only about fifteen yards apart. There were many other nests in the lands round about our compound. Any fresh bamboo box put up during the nesting season was very soon occupied by a pair of these sparrows. They are much more dapper and generally better behaved than their cousins the House-Sparrows, though when a cold-weather flock of them descends on a field of grain they can do considerable damage.

13. *Passer domesticus*. House-Sparrow. *Four nests*.

- (1) Hole in well-wall, 10-12 feet down.
- (2) Hole in well-wall, 10-12 feet down.
- (3) Hole in well-wall, 10-12 feet down. Owing to heavy rain this season the holes were under water in some wells, so there were fewer nests of this species this year.
- (4) Hole in roof of an old building.

In one of the villages outside our compound is an old church, with a large tower built more than a hundred years ago. Here there are many more nests of this species.

14. *Motacilla maderaspatensis*. Large Pied Wagtail. *One nest*.

Hole in a well-wall. This well has been disused for some years. It is just outside our boundary on a piece of waste-land. This pair nested twice in 1946 in the roof of a new building then unoccupied, in our compound.

15. *Mirafra assamica*. Madras Bush-Lark. *One nest*.

On a bare piece of land directly adjoining our most easterly building. We have reared these birds as pets, and they are most attractive.

16. **Eremopterix grisea** Ashy-crowned Finch-Lark. *One nest.*

On the same piece of land, used for dry crops only in the N.-E. Monsoon season.

17. **Cinnyris zeylonica**. Purple-rumped Sunbird (198). *Sixteen nests.*

- (1) *Bougainvillea* sp.
- (2) *Pongamia glabra*, 6 feet.
- (3) *Cassia fistula*, 7 feet.
- (4) Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), 5 feet.
- (5) *Tamarindus indica*. 10 feet.
- (6) *Cassia siamea*, 8 feet.
- (7) *Cassia fistula*.
- (8) *Phyllanthus acidus*.
- (9) *Hibiscus* sp.
- (10) *Butea frondosa*.
- (11) *Tamarindus indica*.
- (12) Rangoon Creeper.
- (13) *Tecoma*.
- (14) *Lawsonia inermis* (Henna).
- (15) Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*).
- (16) Neem tree, 4 feet.

All these nests were under 10 feet from the ground and many as low as 4 or 5 feet. Many times they build their nests on creepers growing over our houses, and on several occasions they have attached their nests to sprays hanging inside the porch entrance to bungalow rooms where our children live, so that it has been possible to watch them at very close quarters during the whole nesting period.

18. **Brachypternus benghalensis**. Southern Golden-backed Woodpecker. *One nest.*

*Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole, 20 feet.

This is common in our compound, and in previous years pairs have nested in various places within and just outside our boundaries.

19. **Megalaima haemacephala**. Indian Crimson-breasted Barbet. *One nest.*

This pair had one nest in a hole in a *Thevetia nerifolia* and a second in a hole in a Rain-tree. We have known them often to nest in holes in *Albizzia*. We have never yet been able to entice this or No. 18 to occupy a nesting-box.

20. **Centropus sinensis**. Southern Crow-Pheasant. *One nest.*

In a cactus hedge on the boundary of an outlying garden. We do not encourage this bird for it has an uncanny way of finding other birds' nests and destroying the contents.

21. **Psittacula krameri**. Rose-ringed Paroquet. *One nest.*

*Albizzia lebbek*, natural hole. This also nests in the church tower in the village outside our gates.

22. **Halcyon smyrnensis**. Indian White-breasted Kingfisher. *Two nests.*

Hole in a well-wall about 12 feet down.

Hole in a pit dug in the ground, only a foot or two under the ground level. These birds often build in holes dug out in the mud walls of our rubbish pits. We have brought them up as pets. It was beautiful to see one we had fly down out of a nearby tree to take a small fish from a boy's outstretched hand. Then it would fly back up into the tree.

23. *Upupa epops*. Ceylon Hoopoe. *Two nests*.

(1) Hole in a wall, about 8 feet, at the back of a shed.

(2) Square nesting-box in a neem tree, 15 feet.

This box was really put up to attract, if possible, a homeless swarm of bees (*Apis indica*). The hole was only about an inch in diameter. One day in April a hoopoe found this, and began to enlarge the hole. It took two days' hard work to make it large enough for the bird to enter. Within less than a hundred yards were two other sites used during the past three years by a pair of hoopoes, but it did not use them, preferring to carve out a new home for itself.

24. *Athene brama*. Southern Spotted Owlet. *Two nests*.

(1) An old earthenware pot, in a Portia tree, put up for bees, 10 feet.

(2) A hole in a well-wall, 12 feet. The two young fell into the well before they were fledged but were rescued. This has built in our square nesting-boxes, from which also the young often fall out.

25. *Astur badius*. Indian Shikra. *Two nests*.

(1) Cork tree (*Millingtonia hortensis*), 30 feet.

This nest we destroyed as it had three young and the parent birds to feed them were causing great havoc among the smaller birds nesting nearby.

(2) *Albizia lebbek*.

26. *Columba livia*. Indian Blue Rock-Pigeon. *Three colonies*.

(1) In the roof of our clock-tower, 60 feet high. Very soon after this was built the birds occupied it.

(2) An old brick dove-cote, 10-15 feet high, used for domestic doves, but later left empty, has also now been taken over by a colony of the Blue Rock-Pigeons. They are semi-domesticated, but never become quite tame.

(3) A granary roof. Perhaps they were led there by the hopes of spilt grain, but in these days of shortage they do not get much.

Another colony is in the old village church tower mentioned before.

We also have four separate dove-cotes for tame pigeons which our boys rear, and these undoubtedly help to attract birds to our compound.

27. *Streptopelia chinensis*. Indian Spotted Dove. *Ten nests*.

(1) *Albizia amara*, 4 feet.

(2) Verandah roof, 7 feet.

(3) *Morinda citrifolia*, 10 feet.

(4) *Citrus* sp., 5 feet.

(5) *Tristellalia australasia*, a creeper on a house.

(6) Verandah roof, 7 feet.

(7) Verandah roof, 7 feet.

(8) Verandah roof, 7 feet.

(9) *Jasminum* sp., a hedge, 4 feet.

(10) *Petrea volubilis*, climbing over a gate, 7 feet.

The casualty rate among the eggs and young of doves seems immense, and yet they remain common. Those that build on the wall plate above verandah pillars try to put their sticks in many places before they succeed in building a whole nest. One bird was seen adding sticks to the nest while the other bird was sitting on it. Sometimes when the sitting bird gets up to fly away the whole nest slides off.

28. *Streptopelia senegalensis*. Indian Little Brown Dove. *Six nests*.

(1) Verandah roof, 7 feet.

(2) Verandah roof, 7 feet. These are very tame and almost allow themselves to be touched on the nest.

- (3) *Porana paniculata*, a thick hedge, 4 feet.
- (4) *Petrea volubilis*, a scandent against a wall, 10 feet.
- (5) *Cycas rumphii*, in the crown, 4 feet.
- (6) Two eggs were found among ferns under a pergola, from which the nest must have blown down.

29. ***Ardola grayi***. Paddy-bird. *Nine nests.*

- (1) *Tamarindus indica*, 20 feet. (February)
- (2) & (3) *Tamarindus indica*, 20 feet. (April)
- (4) Cork tree (*Millingtonia hortensis*), 15 feet. (April)
- (5) *Peltophorum inerme*, 15 feet. (April)
- (6) & (7) *Tamarindus indica*, 20 feet. (July)
- (8) & (9) Neem tree, 25 feet. (July)

These birds were nesting in April and at intervals right on through August. They make the plants and ground beneath their nests very unclean, so are rather a nuisance.

In other years the following birds have also nested within this area:--

***Dendrocitta vagabunda***. Indian Tree-Pie.

***Tephrodornis pondiceriana***. Indian Common Woodshrike.

In neem, tamarind and banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*) trees.

***Uroloncha malabarica***. White-throated Munia.

In a cactus hedge.

***Eudynamis scolopaceus***. Indian Koel.

Eggs have been often found in Common Crow's nests.

***Merops orientalis***. Common Indian Bee-eater.

In furrows of ploughed field, and in a bank of earth which had been excavated when digging a well.

***Alcedo atthis***. Common Ceylon Kingfisher.

In the side of a small pit.

***Milvus migrans***. Common Pariah Kite.

In a tamarind tree.

***Nycticorax nycticorax***. Night Heron.

A colony in tamarind trees.